



Understanding Handwriting, Abbreviations, Dates and More

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Introduction

Searching English records can be daunting enough when you are simply worrying about the time period, content and availability of records. A dive into a variety of records may leave you perplexed when you consider the handwriting styles, Latin, numbering systems, calendar changes, and variety of jurisdictions, record formats and abbreviations that may be found in the records.

Objectives

The objective of this course is to help you better understand:

- Handwriting and Abbreviations
- Latin
- Numbers and Money
- Calendars, Dates, Days, Years
- Church of England Church Records Organization and Jurisdictions
- Relationships

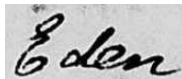
Handwriting and Abbreviations

Understanding the handwriting is the most important aspect to understanding older English records. If you can't read it, you're going to have a very hard time understanding it. While the term 'modern English' applies to any writing style after medieval times (late 1400's), it won't seem like it when you try reading some of it. More than 90% of your research will involve one of two primary English writing scripts or 'hands'. These are 'Secretary hand' which was primarily in use from about 1525 to the mid-1600's. Another handwriting style in use during that time was 'Humanistic hand' which more resembles our more modern English script. As secretary and humanistic hand came together in the mid-1600's, English 'round hand' or 'mixed hand' became the common style and is very similar to handwriting styles in the 1900's. But of course, who writes anymore?


Round or Mixed Hand

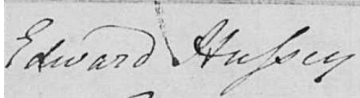
Starting with the more recent handwriting styles, a few of the notable differences in our modern hand are noted here:

'd' –



'f' - 

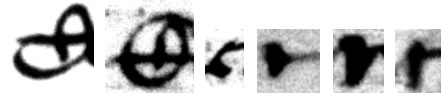
'p' -  "Baptized"

ss' -  "Edward Hussey"

'u' and 'v' – become like the 'u' and 'v' we know today. Prior they were often used interchangeably and could look exactly the same.

Secretary Hand

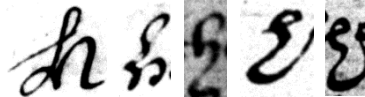
Secretary hand has even more letters that do not resemble more modern English styles. Some of the key ones are:¹

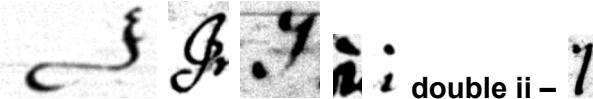

C, c - 

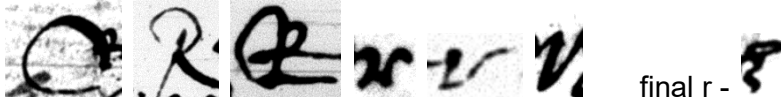

D, d - 

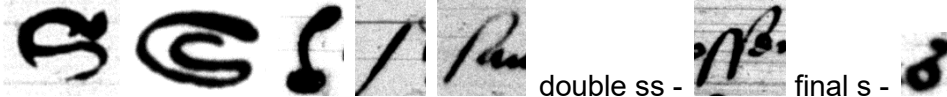


E, e - 

F, f - 

H, h - 

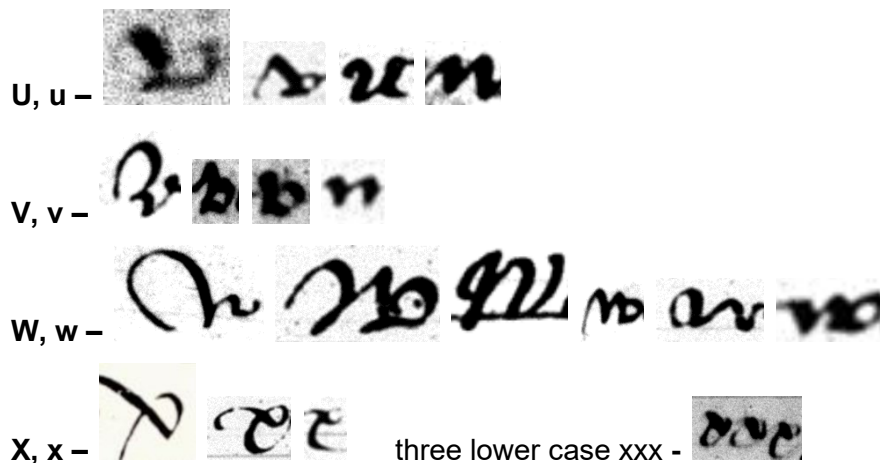
I, i -  double ii - 

R, r -  final r - 

S, s -  double ss -  final s - 

T, t - 

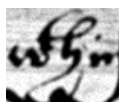
¹ All images taken from FamilySearch.org digital images or microfilm.



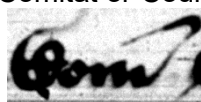
Abbreviations and Symbols

Just like we abbreviate and contract words today, the English did this. Just like the word “can’t” is an abbreviation of “cannot” and an apostrophe is used to indicate the contraction, symbols or marks were often used to indicate abbreviations in older English. Some of the more common abbreviations or marks are:

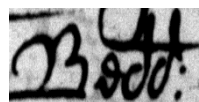
raised letter “th”



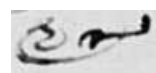
curl back as in “Com”
(Comitat or County)



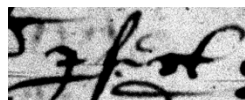
line on top



“&c.” (etc.)



‘per’ or ‘par’ as in “p[er]fect”



thorn



‘es’, ‘is’, ‘ys’ or ‘s’



Remember that, just as we each have slight different styles and idiosyncrasies in our writing styles, this is not new but has been going on for centuries. Only practice and examination of the words and letters, starting from the ones we can decipher and working our way to the ones we can’t, will enable you to become proficient understanding old English handwriting.

Handwriting Helps

Here are some websites taken from the FamilySearch Wiki (<http://wiki.familysearch.org>) that can help you practice or with sample alphabets for when you’re stuck:

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography: a tutorial in how to read the handwriting

<http://rycote.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/palaeography>: The “Palaeography tutorial and exercises section is excellent. Begin with “STEP 1: Getting started”.

Latin

To add to your handwriting woes, may be the fact that before 1733 some of the records are in Latin. It is possible by learning a few basic genealogical terms in Latin to read the records enough to get the genealogical information from them. Every word in Latin has an ending according to how it is used in the sentence.

There are many lists of common Latin words found in the records giving the meaning in English. Some of these lists are: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/latin/beginners/, *Genealogical Research in England and Wales* volume 3 by David Gardner and Frank Smith (FHL book 929.142 G172g

Vol.3), Latin for Local History by Eileen A. Gooder (FHL book 478 G6151 1979), and Latin Word-list for Family Historians by Elizabeth Simpson (FHL book 478.1 S581).

Latin dictionaries online:

- Latin Genealogical Word list:
https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Latin_Genealogical_Word_List
- Google: "Translate Latin to English" for dictionaries

Helps to learn Latin:

- Gandy, Michael. Latin for Family Historians. Birmingham [England], Federation of Family History Societies (Publications) Ltd., 1995. (FHL book 942 D27gm)
- Gooder, Eileen A. Latin for Local History: an Introduction. London [England]; New York [New York]: Longman, 1979. (FHL book 478.045 G615L 1979)
- McLaughlin, Eve. Simple Latin for Family Historians. Birmingham [England], Federation of Family History Societies (Publications) Ltd., 1986. (FHL book 471.1 M273)
- Stuart, Denis. Latin for Local and Family Historians: a Beginner's Guide. Chichester, England: Phillimore & Company Ltd, c1995. (FHL book 942 G2s)

Numbers and Money

Numbers

Into the 1600's, dates (especially days) and money are often recorded in Roman Numerals. Many of us haven't studied Roman Numerals since grade school. In English records the Roman numerals used are typically lower case and there can be some adjustments. Here is how they are often represented:

1 = i	10 = x
2 = ii or ij	20 = xx
3 = iii or iij	30 = xxx
4 = iiij	40 = xl
5 = v	50 = l
6 = vi	100 = c
7 = vii	500 = d
8 = viij	1000 = m
9 = viiij	

A "j" is used to represent the end of a series of numbers. It is a "1" and sometimes the series of numbers is just a "1".

Money

Historically, the primary denominations from smallest to largest were pence, followed by shillings and pounds. Pennies or pence are represented by the letter 'd' taken from the Latin for 'denarius'. Shillings were represented by the letter 's', Latin for 'solidus' and equal to 12 pence. Pounds are represented by the letter 'l' or 'li' and now with the symbol '£' from the Latin for 'libra'. A pound is equal to 20 shillings or 240 pence. Sometimes you will see reference to a score which is equal to 20 pounds. The letters 'd', 's', 'l' or 'li' and 'xx' are typically superscripted when written.

For example, an amount in an inventory reads: $vj^{xx} \text{ } vj^{li} \text{ } v^s \text{ } iij^d$ This reads 6 score, 6 pounds, 5 shillings, and 4 pence. Six score is equal to 120 pounds so the total is 126 pounds, 5 shillings and 4 pence.

There are less common denominations that you may have heard of. They are:

1 farthing (the lowest value coin) = 1/4 penny

Ha'penny (Half penny - a copper coin) = 1/2 penny (pronounced "heipni")
Threepence or Thruppenny Bit = 3 pence (pronounced "thrupence")
Sixpence (a silver coin also called a 'tanner') = 6 pence
1 florin (a silver coin that numismatists regard as one of the most beautiful medieval English coins) = 2 shillings
A half-crown = 2 shillings and 6 pence
1 crown = 5 shillings = 1/4 pound
1 sovereign = a gold coin with a face value of one pound
A guinea was an old coin worth 21 shillings and a mark was not a coin but simply an amount noted on paper worth 13 shillings, 6 pence or 2/3rds of a pound.
The various denominations also have nicknames. A penny was a 'copper', a shilling was a 'bob' and a pound is still a 'quid'.

Additional detail can be found by searching online and an excellent reference book is: *How heavy, how much and how long? Weights, money and other measures used by our ancestors* by C.R. Chapman. (Dursley, Gloucestershire : Lochin Publishing, c1995). FHL Book# 942 H2crc.

Calendars, Dates, Days, Years

Calendars

Before January 1st, 1752, the English used the Julian Calendar, named after Julius Caesar who instituted it in the year 46 BC. The first day of the year according to the Julian Calendar was March 25th (Lady Day or the Annunciation) and the last day of the year was March 24th. This helps explain, for example, why the name for the month of October includes the Latin root 'octo' or eight. According to the Julian Calendar, October was the eighth month of the year if you start in March. In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII introduced the Gregorian Calendar which made the 1st day of the year January 1st and the last day December 31st. Because the King of England (head of the Church of England) was reluctant to switch to a calendar initiated by the Catholic Pope, the English didn't make the switch until 1751. 31 December 1751 was followed by 1 January 1752, not 1 January 1751. Because the calendar had been adopted by other countries earlier, England was still out of step by 11 days with a country like Scotland. When it was 18 May in Scotland, it was only 7 May in England. To fix this, the English cut out 11 days in September. September 2, 1752 was followed by September 14, 1752.

Dates

It was also common to write the names of months differently in English parish records as a form of abbreviation as follows: 7 ber or 7br, 8 ber, 9 ber, 10 ber. These are abbreviations for the months of the year of September (7ber), October (8ber), November (9ber), and December (10ber).

Double Dating

Because of the calendar change in 1752, it can be confusing when a genealogist refers to a date between 1 January and 24 March before that year. Did the genealogist account for the calendar change? Do they really mean 1698 or 1699? The best way to show that the calendar change has been accounted for is to "double date" the day. For example, if a child was baptized 11 February 1623, you will notice in the parish register that the year is about to change after March 24th. After 1751, that day will be at the beginning of the next year so it is best to record the date as 11 February 1623/1624. This indicates the calendar change has been accounted for.

Feast Days Quarter Sessions

Some records, rather than record a date, will mention a feast day. This is a practice that dates to medieval times, the ancient church and commemorated important events in the life of Jesus

Christ. Four of these feasts are referenced most often, especially in quarter sessions court records. The quarter sessions courts met quarterly and were named after the quarter days on which they met. These became the Epiphany (6 Jan), Easter (Sunday after the first full moon on or next after March 21st), Midsummer (24 June), and Michaelmas (29 September) sessions. An online search for “England feast days” will usually produce a sufficient list to answer your research questions.

Regnal Years

Earlier English records may refer to the year of the reign of a king or queen such as in the 10th year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth or “the 7th day of June in the tenth year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord King Charles”. This is especially true in earlier wills. The regnal year starts the day the ruler became king or queen so it usually begins and ends sometime during the middle of a calendar year. A good table for a simple breakdown of the regnal years of English monarchs is: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regnal_years_of_English_monarchs. A good regnal calendar calculator to help you calculate the exact year is found at: <http://people.albion.edu/imacinnis/calendar/Welcome.html>. Click on “Regnal Years”. The 7 June of year 10 Charles I² is in the year 1634.

Church of England Records

Jurisdictions

Understanding the basic organization of the Church of England will help you better understand the records. The most basic jurisdiction is the parish. The parish church was built in an English town and, depending on the population, usually extended to the farms and hamlets in the surrounding area. In cities, more than one parish church was needed and it could cover city blocks.

Some parishes were part of a deanery, a deanery part of an archdeaconry, an archdeaconry part of a diocese and a diocese part of an archdiocese. A simplified Church of England jurisdictional table is as follows:

Jurisdiction	Official	Court
Chapelry	Curate	none
Parish	Rector, Vicar	Peculiar Court
(Rural) Deanery	Dean	none
Archdeaconry	Archdeacon	Archdeaconry Court
Diocese	Bishop	(Episcopal) Consistory Court
Archdiocese	Archbishop	Prerogative Court

It should be noted that deaneries are more prevalent in rural areas. Not every parish vicar reported to an archdeacon. Some reported directly to a bishop, depending on local custom.

² It isn't always clear from the document which King Charles or King Henry you are dealing with, Charles I or Charles II, Henry V or Henry VIII. You need to know the time period for the record you are searching to help you choose the correct sovereign.

PR's, BT's and AT's

Beginning in 1538, the Church of England required parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials be kept. The following table shows the percentage of extant parish registers for those 8586 original ancient parishes and cathedral churches:

As of year	Parishes with registers	% of Surviving Registers
1538 (Henry VIII)	651	7.58%
1558 (Elizabeth I)	2210	25.74%
1603 (Stuarts)	4962	57.80%
1649 (death of Charles I)	5701	66.34%
1660 (Charles II)	6360	74.07%
1707 (Acts of Union)	7730	90.03%

Therefore it is imperative that you are careful with your research. Just because the only John Lennon christening you can find is 5 miles away doesn't mean it is correct. It could be the correct is in the parish you are researching in or next but the records don't survive.

The register books prior to 1812 can be organized in a few different ways. The first parish book is usually organized one of two ways. The book may have been divided into thirds with baptisms recorded first, then marriages recorded somewhere about a third through followed by burials somewhere about two thirds through. Less spaced was needed for marriages so they may take up few pages. It could also be that the baptisms, marriages and burials are all mixed together. They are typically recorded chronologically (earliest to latest) though when space was running out baptisms could be recorded at the end of a marriage or burial section. One register read recently actually started recording baptisms at the back of the book when space ran out and moved toward the front of the book. Take time to understand the register and pay attention to gaps in the record.

In 1754, a new marriage register with forms to fill out was used to conform to Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act so a new register book exclusive of baptisms and burials usually starts then and in 1813, new registers with forms for baptisms and burials were created to conform to the Rose Act. Starting 1 July 1837 a new marriage form is used that asks for father's names and occupations for the first time.

In 1598, parishes were required to send annual copies of their registers to the bishop of their diocese called Bishop's Transcripts (BT's). In some places it was also custom to send a copy to the archdeacon called Archdeacon's Transcripts (AT's). It is common for the Bishop's Transcripts to begin on Lady Day and run through the next Lady Day, even up to the 1800's. These were loose pieces of parchment of varying shapes and sizes and survival of the records varies from place to place. Some of these are digitized or microfilmed in chronological order and others are not.

It should be noted that the condition of and information contained in parish registers, Bishop's Transcripts or Archdeacon's Transcripts may be different so each is worth searching when available.

Christenings

Is it a christening or baptism? The answer is 'yes' because, in Church of England records, an infant baptism is also referred to as a christening. Technically the baptism is the sacrament of

water being poured or wiped on a person's head and the christening is the name of the service at which this is done. Records-wise, they are the same.

Marriages (include Banns)

There were two ways a couple could marry in England. These were by license or by banns. Less than 10% of the population married by license because it was expensive and a bondsman was required. It did allow a minor to marry with permission, the couple to marry sooner and provided more flexibility for where they could marry. Marriage licenses were most often obtained from the bishop of the diocese the parish belonged to so these records will not be found at the parish level. The name of the diocese needs to be known. The archbishop could also issue marriage licenses.

To marry by banns, the marriage was announced at the parish church for three consecutive weeks and if there was no objection, the couple could be married. If the couple were from different parishes then technically banns were supposed to be read in both parishes though couples usually found ways around it.

Terms

You may encounter some unique terms while reading parish registers. Some of these involve illegitimate children. These are a few of the more common terms for referring to an illegitimate child: baseborn, bastard, natural, and spurious. There are many more so a key clue will be if only the name of the mother is listed.

You may also encounter the term privately or half-baptized. When a newborn was too sick to be brought to the church, it was common for the minister to baptize the child in the home privately and then when healthy, take the child to the church for a public baptism. Therefore a child could have two baptismal dates. A half-baptism or private baptism may be noted by the letter 'P' written by it.

Relationships

The terms for some relationships were often the same as those today but the meaning is not necessarily the same. Here is a table of some of the differences:

Father-in-law: stepfather, mother's 2nd husband

Mother-in-law: stepmother, father's 2nd Wife

German: brothers/sisters – both parents in common

Son/daughter-in-law: step-son or step-daughter